

**MINUTES OF THE LOCAL MEETING OF THE
WASHINGTON STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION
October 16, 2007**

The local jurisdiction meeting of the Washington State Transportation Commission was called to order at 8:30 a.m., on Tuesday, October 16, 2007, at the Lakeway Inn & Conference Center, Sehome Conference Room, 714 Lakeway Drive, Bellingham Washington.

Commissioners present at the meeting were: Chair Dick Ford, Ed Barnes, Bob Distler, Elmira Forner, Carol Moser and Dale Stedman.

COMMISSION BUSINESS AND REPORTS

Approval of WSF In-Need Organization

Chair Ford opened the floor for motion to approve Lopez Island Family Center's application for In-need organization.

It was moved by Commissioner Distler and seconded by Commissioner Barnes to approve Lopez Island Family Center's application as an In-need organization. The motion passed unanimously.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

It was moved by the Commission to approve the Ferry Survey conference call verbatim minutes from October 9, 2007. The motion passed unanimously.

Other business

Chair Ford acknowledged the appointment of Paula Hammond as Secretary of Transportation. He moved on noting that Paul Parker, Senior Policy Analyst, WSTC, is focusing on putting together the Commission's annual report.

Commissioner Distler reported that the Commission's Ferry Finance team met with WSF staff and agreed on a work plan.

Reema Griffith, Executive Director, WSTC, shared that the Ferry Survey contract between the Commission and Opinion Research Northwest (formerly Northwest Research Group) has been signed. The consultant forwarded the proposed workplan and the qualitative research, which has been forwarded to the Ferry Survey team for review. A kickoff presentation is planned for the Commission's November agenda.

She also noted that the contract for the Ferry Finance Study will be ready for signature within the next week or so.

Commissioner Moser reported that the Aviation Planning Council will begin meeting on November 1st. This meeting will initiate discussion of the first two parts of the LATS Study.

Chair Ford briefly touched on the release of the Washington State Auditor's Congestion Management Report.

CHAIRMAN WELCOME AND COMMISSION INTRODUCTIONS

Chair Ford welcomed meeting participants and guests. He explained that a part of the Commission's responsibility is to visit local communities throughout the state to hear their perspectives.

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Mayor Jack Louws, City of Lynden and Chairman, Transportation Policy Board, touched on local projects and long-term planning. The City of Lynden is diverse and because of its close proximity to Canada there are some transportation challenges, gas tax being one of those. Other challenges are diminished funding from the state for the local community. The transportation infrastructure is deteriorating on a daily basis. Over the last five years the city has worked towards finding funds to maintain and improve at least one mile of the fifty local lane miles each year. This has been a real challenge that required a commitment to maintain the existing infrastructure. In closing he reflected that we should look at what needs to be done today, not 20 or 30 years down the road.

Gary Tomsic, City Manager, City of Blaine, spoke from a small city's perspective rather than just his community. He recognized that the City of Blaine has exceptional working relationships with the WSDOT, Mount Baker Office and Whatcom Council of Governments. These relationships have benefited projects in the Blaine area. He emphasized that cities are good partners that recognize that the state's transportation project list is huge with limited resources. The Legislature and Commission have to make difficult decisions that cause project delays, with some projects even dropped from the list. He expressed concern that project prioritizing creates hardship to some cities more than others. Basing projects on the amount of funds that the city can provide eliminates less fortunate cities from the project list. The gas tax revenue that cities receive has dropped substantially over the past ten years. Revenue used to pay for projects over the next 2 or 3 years will take 13 years to recoup. Border communities have unique issues that other communities do not have because of the volume of traffic that crosses the border. The bottom line is decisions made by multiple government entities tend to leave cities out of the partnering process to some degree.

Gordon Rogers, Deputy Director, Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG), explained that the WCOG is an MPO and RTPO. The WCOG feels a very strong responsibility for coordinating transportation issues with its neighbors. He emphasized that he hopes the message the Commission takes away today is that Whatcom County has not stood by waiting for project funds, it has taken action regionally. Therefore, much has been accomplished within communities. He echoed Mr. Tomsic's comment regarding the relationship that the local jurisdiction has with the MPO and WSDOT. He also touched on the excellent relationships and successes with other entities, such as the Farmhouse Gang, seeking alternative modes of transportation. In closing he reflected that the county's transportation system is seeing improvement.

Commissioner Moser noted that she is impressed with Mr. Tomsic's comment "city managers and local elected officials, WSDOT and government agencies are in the business of building communities, not just infrastructure."

Commissioner Stedman asked if state law permits every county/city in the state, with voter approval, to enact a local gas tax of up to 10 percent of the state tax. With the state tax at 36 cents per gallon, this could provide a substantial amount of money.

Mr. Rogers responded that he was not aware of this specific law.

Mr. Tomsic responded that this is very political, especially when neighboring cities do not enforce the same tax.

Commissioner Distler emphasized that we are far behind having infrastructure keep up with growth even though local issues have not always been acted upon; this is a statewide issue requiring action by the Legislature.

Commissioner Forner expressed that she was very pleased with Mr. Tomsic's partnership comments.

Commissioner Barnes noted that there has been no mention of the local jurisdiction partnering with TIB or FMSIB.

Mr. Tomsic responded that the City of Blaine has partnered with TIB on a couple of projects with great success.

LOCAL TRANSPORTATION ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Pete Kremen, Whatcom County Executive and Mayor Tim Douglas, City of Bellingham, welcomed the Commission and introduced Tim McKinley, City Works Inspector, City of Bellingham.

Mr. Kremen shared that Whatcom County has the distinction as the third largest U.S./Canada Port of Entry, hosting over 700 thousand trucks and 7 million cars per year. The county's population is about 190 thousand, which provides meager resources to offset the impacts of cross-border travel. Border crossing delays are expensive for the local community, but all Washington residents. The County hopes that the Legislature is aware that Whatcom County is the key portal for trade with British Columbia. The county's law enforcement system becomes responsible for individuals apprehended at the border that have charges pending other than security, customs or immigration offenders. The county's taxpayers incur about \$3 million per year from this caseload. In closing he emphasized that Whatcom County's economic vitality is important to the state's economy. The local transportation system includes over 200 miles of state routes, many routes are in dire need of improvement, with substantial portions having no shoulders at all. We remain hopeful that the state takes these factors seriously when developing the state's transportation plans and policies. Just for the record Whatcom County voted against I 695 and supported recent gas tax initiatives and taxed themselves for transit services. The county has worked closely and cooperatively with state agencies and adjoining jurisdictions.

Action has been taken locally to fund programs to reduce single occupancy vehicle travel and commute trips. The county is working towards developing an equitable impact fee system. The county asks that its unique substantial overall contribution to the state's economy be taken into consideration as transportation improvement decisions are made.

Mayor Douglas noted that the City of Bellingham has contributed 18 percent towards important regional highway improvements in the greater Bellingham area. The majority of the projects undertaken are in urban areas near the state highway system. It is hoped that these projects helped alleviate some of the pressure on the system. The city's six-year TIP project list will relieve traffic on I 5, SR 539 and SR 542. A partnership with the Port of Bellingham in redeveloping the central waterfront is very important to the city's economic future. But a number of challenges will be faced with this 20/30 year build-out project, as well as a substantial investment by the city.

Mr. Kremen commented that the state's transportation funding system is fractured. The notion that local governments should pay for infrastructure at the local level has a minimal amount of validity. The system is broken and one of the most glaring problems is that the legislature has continually punted. He emphasized that he is not opposed to local financing of transportation infrastructure, but when other counties vote no on local gas taxes, it's not right to ask counties that vote yes to subsidize those counties and tax themselves as well. The Legislature needs to take bold steps to make a difference in the transportation system.

Commissioner Moser questioned if the waterfront project is receiving funds from the tax increment financing project. She also questioned if there is a possibility that legislators could be convinced to use tax increment financing.

Mayor Douglas responded that "yes" the waterfront project is on the Local Infrastructure Financing Tool (LIFT) list and he believes that it will be successful in Bellingham as well as an economic engine for the entire state. The legislation will provide a good look at how LIFT works, with up to \$2.5 million a year split between three pilot projects: up to \$1 million for the Bellingham waterfront, up to \$1 million for Spokane's "river district" urban renewal, and up to \$500,000 for Vancouver's downtown Riverwest Project. It creates a competitive process for other LIFT projects around the state, with an additional \$2.5 million a year.

STATE TRANSPORTATION ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Todd Harrison, Assistant Regional Administrator and Todd Carlson, Planning & Engineering Services Manager, Northwest Region-Mt. Baker Area, WSDOT, provided highlights of area projects.

Mr. Harrison provided a recap of the Commission's Peace Arch, SR 543 and SR 439 tour. He noted that with funding and future funding being a subject of discussion, the Department is wrapping up the Nickel Projects. There is a big push over the next couple of years with transportation partnership funding. He shared information regarding the expiration of SAFETEA-LU federal funding and how it impacts various projects in the area.

Mr. Carlson shared that he is responsible for planning and engineering services for the region. He explained that the majority of congestion in Whatcom County is in the Bellingham area due to the border crossing. He pointed out that a means of moving the trucks around is top priority. The game plan is to tackle the issue on Interstate 5 by using managed lanes. Tom Stacey, Project Manager, Interstate Master Plan, Northwest Region, WSDOT, explained that the Interstate Master Plan process began about a year and a half ago and should be completed June 2008. The project study area is a 10-mile segment of Interstate 5, including local streets connecting to the interstate, from Fairhaven Parkway to Slater Road. The reason a master plan was chosen is to meet the needs of thru traffic on the associated corridors and to meet the needs of local traffic. The project will include traffic design and environmental analysis to address current and future critical needs of the interstate as well as local traffic needs. Phase one is near completion and Phase two will begin later this month. In closing he noted that traffic on the interstate is growing at a rate of 115 percent and local thru truck traffic to the port is growing at a rate of 275 percent.

WHATCOM TRANSIT ISSUES

Richard Walsh, General Manager, Whatcom Transportation Authority (WTA), shared a historical perspective of WTA services. He moved on to comment that, if represented 45 percent of WTA funding was removed by Initiative 695. For a few years reserve funds were used until local voters approved an initiative to replace those lost motor vehicle excise tax dollars with local sales tax dollars. Voters approved a three tenth of one percent sales tax increase in March 2002. WTA has not looked back, but has engaged a community dialogue to get direction on what the public wanted to see their public transportation do in the future. This resulted in a service expansion in 2005. It was found that the community's expectation was that WTA become a more active and engaged player with the county's stakeholders. This has evolved into a system that is more attractive to alternative riders. Most significant to this is the implementation of high-frequency transit along designated corridors. Ridership since 2006 has increased by 10 percent with a 12 percent increase projected for 2008. He emphasized that high-frequency transit services has been very beneficial with an increased ridership of 60 percent since its implementation. He moved on to comment briefly regarding the county connector service. WTA and Skagit Transit share a grant from WSDOT to allow this service to continue to provide eight trips per day, with a ridership of approximately 220 per day with continued growth that is being monitored for additional service needs. In closing he highlighted that WTA has just completed a remodel of its downtown Bellingham station to expand the capacity of the building and provide additional amenities and security.

BORDER CROSSING ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Hugh Conroy, Whatcom Council of Governments and Project Manager, International Mobility and Trade Corridor Project (IMTC), explained that the IMTC has been led by the Whatcom Council of Governments since 1997. The objective of the IMTC is to coordinate transportation connections (all modes) throughout the US and Canadian Peace Arch station. Current projects underway include the Blaine/I-5 border interchange study, FAST (Free Secure Trade Program) Marketing, Cross-border passenger vehicle survey, Sumas commercial vehicle routing alternatives analysis and the Cascade Gateway Border Circulation Analysis. Recent policy and operations changes include Automated Commercial Environment and Canadian e-manifest.

Emerging policy issues include increasing border delays, currency parity, new U.S. immigration laws, Canadian Gateway Policy Framework and U.S. transportation reauthorization. Broader policy issues are: interest in establishing pre-clearance for rail and cross-border bus transit.

TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES FOR RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Rick Gantman, Superintendent, Mt. Baker School District, provided an overview of the school districts bus ridership and transportation challenges. He explained that the biggest challenges are road designs that exclude shoulders, bus pull-outs and sight distance. There are issues with excessive speed limits, inadequate road signage, student traffic, lack of law enforcement and road restrictions. In closing he emphasized that regardless of the many challenges that school districts face regarding their transportation of students, the most important issue is student safety.

Commissioner Stedman suggested that Mr. Gantman contact the Washington State Traffic Safety Commission regarding safety issues that need to be addressed.

FREIGHT MOBILITY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Pat Pollock, BP Cherry Point, provided an overview of how freight impacts business development, safety and health and Whatcom County's infrastructure. He emphasized that Whatcom County has the third busiest Canadian border crossing. There is \$17 billion in trade, \$3.5 billion on rail, 40 percent of which is for Whatcom County. A ten-year forecast shows an increase in truck traffic of 110 percent, 63 percent rail increase, 174 percent increase in passenger rail (which shares the same line as freight). Border delays cost approximately \$22 million per year (loss of commerce to the state). Cross functionality between the U.S. and Canada would provide remedy to this situation.

Not improving freight movement impacts business by limiting employment opportunities, creates higher costs because of delayed deliveries, higher freight management costs and a loss of efficiency resulting in higher fuel costs and more delivery trucks. It also limits the ability to move goods through Whatcom County affecting the state as a whole. There are alternatives to freight on the highway and minimizing uncontrolled rail crossings that impacts the safety of the community, the environment and emergency responders. Whatcom County is a very strategic location for freight movement in the state. Though not near the capacity of movement that the Seattle/Tacoma area holds, Whatcom may quickly become a bottleneck for goods traveling to and from the Northwest Washington area. The situation is made clear by studies already completed by WSDOT and the local WCOG. He noted that the Washington Transportation Plan lacks an assessment of Cherry Point's industrial deep water port capabilities. In closing he asked that the Commission take a look at policy constraints.

COMMUTE TRIP REDUCTION (CTR) SMART TRIPS PROGRAM

Susan Horst, Community Transportation Program Manager, Whatcom Council of Governments, shared that the objective of today's presentation is to encourage people to drive their vehicles less and use alternative transportation. People will drive less if policies are driven by groups that set the policy and investments that are needed. Some of the things that prevent people from using alternative forms of transportation are a lack of information and the perception of safety issues and awareness of alternatives. The program helps people and groups work through these issues and perceived inconveniences. The Whatcom Smart

Trips Program encourages people to make more of their trips by walking, bicycling, sharing rides and riding the bus to any destination in Whatcom County instead of driving alone. The goal is to reduce traffic congestion, reduce air and water pollution and preserve quality of life. The City of Bellingham, Whatcom County, Whatcom Transportation Authority and Whatcom Council of Governments are all sponsors and active partners of the program. There is additional support received from Puget Sound Energy, Conoco Phillips, Northwest Clean Air Agency and WSDOT.

Neighborhood Smart Trips is a part of the program consisting of a survey that is being out-sourced to collect mobility data in the County. This measurement will be based on actual data and used as a tool to measure actual potential. The COG would like to see an 8-12 percent decrease in single occupancy vehicle trips, more pedestrians and cyclists and bus trips and a reduction of greenhouse gases. People need to see the reality that we are in a transition to a different transportation system in the future that emphasizes other modes.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Paul Locke, citizen, shared his views regarding the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax revenue emphasizing that people need to realize that they need to tighten up and not spend as much. The state does not have enough money to cover all these programs. The emphasis should be on figuring out ways to get the job done and reduce the costs. He believes that every dollar spent to run transit agencies creates additional costs in road repairs, and that most of these repairs are inadequate and need to be redone frequently. He pointed out that we need to start taking a look at what is driving the cost up and take preventative action.

Representative Erickson thanked the Commission for coming to Whatcom County and local executives for their participation in today's meeting. He shared that there are two specific storm water issues on both the Guide Meridian and the SR 9/Sumas Projects. Both of these projects were impacted by storm water permitting issues with the Department of Ecology costing excess dollars and time on both projects. Not only is there increased cost and time on these projects, the public's perception is affected, the trust factor lost and tax payers dollars are wasted.

The Commission meeting adjourned at 4:45 p.m., on October 16, 2007.

WASHINGTON STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

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Secretary of Transportation

JENNIFER ZIEGLER, Governor's Office

ATTEST:

REEMA GRIFFITH, Executive Director

DATE OF APPROVAL